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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIRUT 000372

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PARM](#) [PINR](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [LE](#)  
SUBJECT: LEBANON: MINDEF WORRIED THAT HIZBALLAH WAR WITH  
ISRAEL IMMINENT

REF: A. BEIRUT 355  
[1](#)B. IIR 6 857 0185 08  
[1](#)C. IIR 6 857 0189 08  
[1](#)D. BEIRUT 324

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Classified By: Charge D'Affaires a.i. Michele J. Sison  
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (S) In a March 10 meeting with Charge, MinDef Murr expressed his growing concern that a Hizballah war with Israel is imminent. His assessment is based upon recent Hizballah preparations, reported movement of families, and the precipitous increase in Israeli overflights of Lebanon. Murr does not think that Hizballah can win another war with Israel and will be defeated. Describing Hizballah as "scared," Murr opined that they are scared because they know that Israel might be about to attack, or, more probably, they fear the retribution Israel will heap upon them when Hizballah takes revenge for the killing of terrorist Imad Mughniya. Murr offered some ideas aimed at avoiding turning the Christian population against Israel when the next war with Hizballah occurs. Murr also outlined his orders to the Lebanese Army when/if Israel invades to counter Hizballah. End summary.

[1](#)2. (S) Charge, Defense Attache and ODC Chief met with Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Elias Murr on March 10 at his home in Rabieh. The atmosphere of the meeting was cordial and friendly.

HIZBALLAH MEMBERS RENTING SUMMER HOMES;  
NOT ALL REPORTED ACTIVITY  
DIRECTLY RELATED TO WAR PLANNING

[1](#)3. (S) Contacts such as Amine Gemayel (ref A) and Walid Jumblatt have been telling us recently that the Shia, and in particular senior Hizballah members, have been acquiring land or renting homes in the Christian areas of Jezzine, Jebel Rihan, Junieh, Zahle as well as in Druze areas. This is

causing alarm among the Christian populations in these locations and is being taken as a sign by some that Hizballah is planning for war.

14. (S) MinDef Murr told us that he has looked into these rumors and, indeed, it was impossible to find a rental property in these areas. Regarding the activity in Jezzine, Murr assured us that this was nothing more than investing in Lebanon by Lebanese Shia expats based in West Africa. As for the buying of Christian properties, Murr reported that the Christians want to sell their property so they can leave Lebanon. In any case, Murr did not see a military linkage between the sale of homes in Jezzine and Hizballah planning.

15. (S) As for the areas further north in Lebanon such as Keserwan and the Metn, Murr confirmed that Shia are renting in high numbers there because they feel that Israel is going to attack soon. Such action could take place as early as April 2008, he warned. (Comment: Shia took refuge throughout Christian areas in south Lebanon during the July 2006 war, with as many as 300-400 people crowded into a single church for weeks on end. End Comment.) Murr also told us that Hassan Nasrallah's cousin has moved his family out of the southern suburbs, the Dahiyya, and rented a chalet in the resort town of Farayya for a year. According to Murr, this means that Nasrallah is on high alert.

16. (S) In addition to renting homes in these areas, Hizballah is making many concessions to the Christians who live in these areas. In a meeting three weeks ago between top Hizballah officials such as Wafiq Safa and March 14 members at MoD Headquarters in Yarze, Hizballah agreed to all of the Christians demands. The two most notable concessions were that Hizballah will not place any signage with Nabih Berri or Hassan Nasrallah's image in these locations and that Hizballah will not have a visible presence in these areas.

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(Comment: This is significant. During the July 2006 war, Hizballah members moved into Christian areas and started converting them to Hizballah strongholds. On one occasion, Hizballah attempted to place a Nasrallah banner on the facade of a local church. When the inhabitants protested, they were intimidated into acquiescing. The banner was later hung inside the church. End Comment.) Murr thinks that Hizballah agreed to these concessions because it wants to avoid internal problems at all costs while it prepares for its external fight with Israel. During this same meeting, March 14 members learned that Hizballah has rockets that can fly over 200 kilometers.

HIZBALLAH NOT CONVINCED THEY CAN WIN  
THEY WILL LOSE IF THEY TRY WAR WITH ISRAEL  
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17. (S) Murr told us that Hizballah is not "internally convinced" that it can win this time. It was internally convinced that it could win in 2006. Murr predicted that Hizballah's war with Israel will not be like 2006 and that the fight in the Bekaa Valley will be very different. Saying that Israel paid the price by fighting in the villages in 2006, Murr harbors no illusion that they will not get bogged down in the village a second time. Instead, Murr thinks they will bypass strongholds in villages and pursue the main forces, the rockets.

18. (S) "I am sure Hizballah is scared and they are preparing for a severe lesson this time," Murr said. Hizballah must respond to the Mughniya assassination, but they know it will bring retribution. Murr thinks that an attack in West Africa or South America would be easier for Hizballah but he thinks Nasrallah would prefer to attack inside of Israel if possible. Hizballah will attempt to bring in Syria to absorb some of the Israeli response to their attack, he added.

SYRIA'S ASSAD SEES NO SIGNALS OF WAR

THINKS HIS SUMMIT WILL SUCCEED

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¶9. (S) Murr related that Saudi journalist Ghassan Charbel of the Al-Hayat newspaper recently returned to Beirut from Damascus where he met with Bashar Al-Assad. Charbel told Murr that Bashar Assad told him "I have no Israeli signal of a strike or a war even if Hizballah thinks this way."

¶10. (S) Assad feels that his Arab Summit will happen and that he can continue to pursue his agenda in Lebanon, Charbel informed Murr. Specifically, he intends to push for the 10-10-10 Cabinet formula while waiting for the term of the Bush Administration to expire. He does not see anything at all happening this year in Lebanon, Charbel had said. Murr seemed to think otherwise, reporting that Syria has recalled 250,000 migrant agricultural workers from Lebanon who also serve in the Syrian military reserves.

UNSCR 1701 AREAS OF LEBANON ARE PROTECTED  
HIZBALLAH WILL NOT FIGHT ON THIS TERRAIN  
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¶11. (S) Murr said that Hizballah does not want to move inside the UNSCR 1701 areas or to provoke any problems with the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). However, if Israel violates the 1701 battlespace, Hizballah will use this opportunity to flood back into this area. If Israel does not go into the 1701 area, Hizballah will not enter these areas either.

¶12. (S) Returning to the theme of a wary Hizballah, Murr told us that "they (Hizballah) are scared, terrorized. They know the Israelis will not lose again." Murr thinks that Ehud Barak is a very different Minister of Defense than the one who tried to win a war using airpower. Additionally, Hizballah knows that President Bush is coming to Israel in May, so they think that this new war must be completed by that time.

MICHEL AOUN "GOING INSANE"  
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¶13. (S) When asked what role Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun is playing right now, Murr deadpanned that he is "going insane." Retired BG Fouad Ashkar, an Aoun advisor dating to Aoun's time as Lebanese Army Commander, came to see Murr on March 9 to discuss weapons permits for Aoun's bodyguards. Murr told Ashkar that he was authorized only ten permits. Aoun had recently contacted Murr's father to try and pressure the MinDef into agreeing to fifty weapons permits. A defiant Murr told Ashkar to "go get some of your Hizballah suicide bombers to serve as bodyguards," the sub-context being that perhaps Michel Aoun would get blown up along the way.

¶14. (S) Murr is also limiting the number of visitors that can drive up to Aoun's house in the protected enclave of Rabieh. Murr only allows official visitors such as MPs to approach the house; all the others must park outside and ride shuttles. Murr says that the residents of Rabieh are exhausted with Aoun being a bad neighbor and going against Christian traditions by backing Hizballah.

¶15. (S) Indeed, Murr assesses that Aoun is "going insane." He is increasingly responding to the demands of Ghassan Gebril and his daughters, no matter how outlandish the ideas. He is allergic to any mention of Army Commander General Michel Sleiman and cannot accept a Sleiman Presidency; all this, while taking up to five insulin shots a day to try and control his increasingly severe diabetes.

ENTER "THE PRESIDIUM";  
CONVINCING THE PATRIARCH

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¶16. (S) The idea of a more permanent arrangement where the Cabinet exercises more of its executive (Presidential) authorities is being discussed. Some have even dubbed this arrangement a "Presidium" since the Cabinet would move to exercise full Presidential prerogatives. Murr thinks that the Maronite Patriarch will be reluctant to accept this idea as it will effectively terminate the existence of the Presidency to some indeterminate time in the future. Even so, some leaders intend to address this subject with the Patriarch in order to revive some government functions that are lying dormant.

¶17. (S) Murr expressed skepticism about this concept, saying leaders such as Amine Gemayel and Saad Hariri will use this to elevate "stupid" people so that their own political light is not obscured or risk being dimmed by another rising politician. They are looking at this from their selfish parochial views, an approach not uncommon in Lebanese politics, Murr complained.

BUT ISRAEL IS STILL MY MAIN CONCERN;  
OVERFLIGHTS THE MOST SINCE 1982  
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¶18. (S) Making clear that he was not responsible for passing messages to Israel, Murr told us that Israel would do well to avoid two things when it comes for Hizballah One, it must not touch the Blue Line or the UNSCR 1701 areas as this will keep Hizballah out of these areas. Two, Israel cannot bomb bridges and infrastructure in the Christian areas. The Christians were supporting Israel in 2006 until they started bombing their bridges. If Israel has to bomb all of these places in the Shia areas as a matter of operational concern, that is Hizballah's problem. According to Murr, this war is not with Lebanon, it is with Hizballah. Murr also told us that the number of overflights recently (reftel B and C) are the highest number since 1982. The last time there were this many overflights was just prior to Israel invading south Lebanon in April 1982, he stated flatly.

IT'S NOT OUR WAR  
WE HAVE TO PRESERVE THE ARMY  
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¶19. (S) Murr said that he had summoned LAF Commander General Sleiman to discuss preparations for a Hizballah conflict with

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Israel on March 7. Murr was especially concerned for members of the 1st and 8th Brigades in the Beka'a valley. Murr thinks that these units will be cut off from LAF HQ support while Israel is conducting operations against Hizballah in the Beka'a. As such, they will have to turn to the local populace for food, water etc. Since the populace is mainly Hizballah supporters, Murr is afraid that these two units could be dragged into the fight, the ultimate disaster that Murr hopes to avoid. As such, Murr is trying to ascertain how long an offensive would be required to clean out Hizballah in the Beka'a. The LAF will move to pre-position food, money, and water with these units so they can stay on their bases when Israel comes for Hizballah--discreetly, Murr added.

¶20. (S) Murr also gave guidance to Sleiman that the LAF should not get involved "when Israel comes." This guidance came four days after Sleiman had instructed his officers to be prepared (ref D). Murr told us that he promised Sleiman the political cover for LAF inaction. Murr's opinion is that an Israeli action against Hizballah would not be a war against Lebanon and that Syria and Iran did not ask Lebanon's permission to equip Hizballah with its rockets. As such, the LAF has been ordered to not get involved with any fighting and to fulfill a civil defense role, such as humanitarian support, when/if hostilities break out. Murr told us that he

would personally speak to the Shia officers in the Army to make sure they understood why the Army was not going to participate. For Murr, the LAF's strategic objective was to survive a three week war "completely intact" and able to take over once Hizballah's militia has been destroyed. "I do not want thousands of our soldiers to die for no reason," Murr declared.

COMMENT

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¶21. (S) Murr's concern over another Hizballah war with Israel appeared to be genuine. The length of time spent on this topic given the other political machinations in Lebanon during the two and a half hour conversation was indicative of his level of concern. Murr seems intent on ensuring the Army stays out of the way so that Hizballah bears the full weight of an Israeli offensive. While we have noted the increase in Israeli overflights, to include one over downtown Beirut Friday, March 7, we have not seen indications that validate Murr's concern that an Israeli offensive might be imminent.

SISON